

C.M.S. NEWS-LETTER

Dear Fellow-member of C.M.S.,

"Being present among people with a essence willed and intended as a witness of the love of Christ"—those words of Charles de Foucauld express most clearly what is being more and more recognized today as the foundation attitude of mind for the Christian who accepts any responsibility for evangelism. Every word that quotation counts and needs to be given full value. And what it says is true everywhere. Evangelism, of course, involves more than this. But without this may be queried whether there can be Christian evangelism at all. For evangelism means more than preaching. It means the Word becoming flesh again and again and again. That conviction lies behind every one of these NEWS-LETTERS. In so far as any of their arguments are found to be convincing it is because the reader and the writer share that conviction, and are trying in different ways and varying circumstances to work it into the stuff of life. That is the "window" through which these NEWS-LETTERS look out on to the scene of the Christian Mission everywhere.

In particular, in this number, it is the "window" through which we look at the people of Islam, and through which we step out to be "among" them. For the "window" is never high up in some ivory tower. It is on the ground floor, and it opens outwards. You step through this window *if you see through it at all.*

SOME WEST AFRICAN VILLAGES

Let me take you to a part of West Africa where Islam, Christianity and Paganism meet. I have in front of me, as I write, the long report of one of our missionaries who for a year and a half was engaged in village evangelism at just such a point of meeting. Here is a paragraph from her report which is in effect a summary of her discoveries:

'In the majority of villages the village head is a Muslim. A few, however, are pagan, and as far as I can remember only one village head was a Christian. However, generally speaking, these village heads seem to be influenced in their outlook and beliefs more by pagan thought and belief than by Islam. There are, of course, exceptions to this rule, and where there are exceptions, the heads are very rigidly Muslim in their

WHERE THEY MEET

—some notes on religious encounter

Some West African villages

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thought and belief. But it was told me by a former Muslim that in this area only ten per cent of the Muslims know anything about the thought and belief of Islam. I was also told that many of the people who are pagan in thought and belief call themselves Muslims because it is easier for them when they are dealing with the government. And there is a tendency for the Muslim to look down on the pagan, as an inferior person, and the pagan dislikes this attitude."

That missionary's observation accurately reproduces the present situation over a great deal of West Africa, parts of Sudan and parts of East Africa. To understand the significance of this religious encounter we need to remember certain facts. Africa everywhere is "on the move". In some places the movement is like a volcanic eruption: in a few places it is barely perceptible as yet: almost everywhere it is obvious, and it is a movement which is not just a movement "on the surface". It is touching the deeps. There are at present three main claimants for the "soul" of the African—Islam, Christianity, and a purely secular view of life. What is not always realized is that at least half of the people of Africa, probably more than half, have not yet made their choice.

With those facts to ponder let us look a little further into the picture painted by that missionary. As a guide to a fuller understanding I want to take Dr. Spencer Trimingham, a former C.M.S. missionary of great experience, at present teaching in Glasgow University. Anyone with pretensions to understand the encounter of religions in Africa, and most certainly any missionary involved in this encounter, ought to acquire and study most carefully his recent book *Islam in West*



Africa and an earlier book, published in 1952, *Islam in Ethiopia*. Much in these books is detail, material for the scholar rather than the ordinary reader. But I know of no other sources where such profoundly illuminating insights into what is happening in this encounter are so carefully supported by observed facts, themselves distinguished by the trained mind of a scholar who knows Islam with a respectful intimacy.

TOWARDS UNDERSTANDING

Here let me join together a number of separate passages from these books which together will interpret the situation that other missionary described. Let me, however, safeguard Dr. Trimingham from injustice at my hands by quoting his own warning:

"Over-simplification and a piecemeal approach must be avoided in assessing the causes of religious change. The impact of Islam is far more complicated than any listing of historical and psychological factors makes apparent."

That said, the following quotations will help our understanding:

"African Islam in contact with animists is characterized by a series of gradations which act as insulators passing Islamic radiation on, diminuendo, to animist societies. . . . Islam does no violent uprooting but offers immediate value without displacing the old. . . . We must make clear that we can rarely talk of an individual and never of a community being converted to Islam in the sense of any sudden reorientation of life around a new centre. There is a long process during which this reorientation is being effected. . . . Although there is no definite point in this process of change where one can state 'Here animism ends and Islam begins', there is a point where one can say of an individual, 'This man is a Muslim, not a pagan'. He is an animistic Muslim undoubtedly, but a change has taken place in his inner consciousness whereby he has crossed a boundary-line and is on the threshold of a new world. . . . What really marks the change is shown by the answer to the question, 'Who or what governs life?' There comes a point when the ritual pattern is disrupted, a point in family life when the chief spirit around whom worship was concentrated is rejected for the formerly unworshipped sky-god whose name becomes a synonym for Allah as alone worthy of worship, whilst former gods become subject or evil spirits. . . . The various peoples of the region are at all possible stages of the Islamic path, but everywhere can be seen the process by which Islam assimilates those ineradicable rites and beliefs which it is powerless to abolish by attaching to them orthodox interpretations and explanatory Muslim legends. . . . In order to understand what

happens when Islam claims the souls of pagans it must be realized that Islam does in time re-create the entire life of the believer. . . . The established Islam of West Africa is not the Islam of the twentieth-century Near East, influenced so many ways by the currents of Western civilization, which is adapting itself to demands of the modern world, but the Islam of the Middle Ages. . . . BUT Islam has had centuries to Africanize and improve itself. Islam is part of the African scene whilst Christianity still suffers from the handicap of being a Western religion, and there is even some reaction against it on this account. In many parts it is stagnant and turned in upon itself, and African Christians have shown little missionary impulse. Islam presents itself to the inhabitants of a disintegrating world as less alien, even familiar and known in a sense that has its place in the African set-up. Although Islam is also stagnant it has the field to itself over vast areas where it spreads by natural diffusion, though it remains possible for an African Christianity to awaken and spread rapidly. . . . One fact must be borne in mind. . . . This is the simultaneous spread of Western secularism."

(These extracts are from *Islam in West Africa*, pages 33, 36, 37, 219, 224, and from *Islam in Ethiopia*, page 225.)

That chain of passages is worth pondering. They throw light on the encounter of religions and also on the missionary task of the Christian Church. I have quoted from two books of Dr. Trimingham dealing with different parts of Africa. They are, in many respects, valuable not only in themselves but supplementing each other. In one particular Dr. Trimingham distinguishes between Islam in these two areas. In Ethiopia, and this goes for all Somalia as well, the cult of saints is the point at which Islam comes "alive" for the ordinary believer. In West Africa the corresponding element is the cult of spirits. These differences are important and should have a bearing on the work in which the Christian faith is presented. The one is concerned with the structure of the spiritual universe. The other is concerned with making religion personal.

In this latter connexion I have recently come across a book which, in the form of a travelogue, offers "pictorial" confirmation of some of the scholarly judgments of Dr. Trimingham in his book *Islam in Ethiopia*. This book, translated from the Danish and published under the title *The Horn of Africa*, is a most intriguing tale of travels in Somalia. Chapter 3 on "Islam in Africa" is a little gem of interpretation. The book is invaluable also as an introduction to another "emerging

ation soon to "enjoy" political independence.

So far in this NEWS-LETTER we have been thinking of the place where Islam, Christianity, Paganism—and now secularism—are meeting. We have looked at grass-roots situation among simple people—a situation far removed from the meeting of Christian scholars and Muslim sheikhs. The important thing to realize is that both kinds of meeting are indispensable, both have their place in evangelism, and in both the same fundamental attitude of mind is essential if conversation is to issue in Christ being recognized, then respected, and finally accepted and obeyed.

A CHRISTIAN SCHOOL IN MUSLIM AFRICA

Some while ago another of our missionaries, the headmistress of a school in a country with a Muslim government, wrote me a long letter posing certain questions. Here is an extract:

A Muslim father brought his daughter to be admitted to the school. He asked about the Scripture teaching and was told what we did, and then he added comfortably: "But it doesn't make any difference." It was pointed out that we tried to make a difference, but he still allowed his child to come, quite confident that it didn't really make any difference. I believe he put into words what most of our parents feel, namely, that there is no danger of their daughters being converted to Christianity."

A recent government regulation in that particular country has since then made the teaching of Scripture to Muslim children illegal. That for the purpose of this illustration is, however, irrelevant.)

GROUND FLOOR WINDOW

Let me quote a short extract from a very long letter which I wrote in reply, dealing with many matters, of which this was only one. I wonder if the reader will agree with me? I wrote:

"The good father was, of course, a very bad psychologist. If by 'doesn't make any difference' he meant 'she won't become a baptized Christian', he may well be right. But one reason, perhaps only half recognized for what it was, why he wanted his daughter to go to your school is precisely because he knows it will make a difference. He wants it to make a difference.

"Let us for the moment accept the fact that the girl may not 'become a Christian' in the sense of being baptized into the Church. Provided that your patient love surrounds that child, then through you Jesus is doing something with that child's inner being. His redeeming love is actually in action. Something is happening in the re-

cesses of her being which would not happen if she was not in that school and if you were not there. The Master Carpenter of Nazareth is at work. He loves that child and He has His eternal purpose for her. Part of that purpose can only be fulfilled by her being with you in that school. The school is for the time being the Carpenter's workshop.

"Christ, through you, is making a difference."

Later in the letter I added this:

"Do I need to add that for my part I hope you'll be able to carry on as a C.M.S. missionary whatever happens in the way of government regulations about teaching Scripture and saying prayers in school.

"I do not believe that this is an issue which can be argued *in vacuo*, and a general principle of universal validity laid down. Any such government regulations as you anticipate would be the expression of a political climate of thought, which might itself change at any moment. The essential point in your situation is that here is a school with a tradition and with Christians like yourself able to determine its whole atmosphere. As long as that remains possible I would hope that you would remain, unless you felt clearly guided to other work."

That is another illustration from the "grass-roots" of Christian evangelism where Christians are "present among" Muslims.

COMMON GROUND

The great difficulty for the Christian who as a missionary is "present with" the Muslims he serves is to hold in his mind and in his love four realities—Islam at its noblest and best, "Islam" the religion of the Muslim as time and circumstance have corrupted it, the Muslim with whom at any moment he is present, and the Christ who is also present and whose presence is the redeeming, transfiguring factor. So understood, our missionary task is certainly difficult but none the less possible. There is, of course, a fifth reality, the Christian, himself equally strangely compounded.

Thus understanding his "presence", the Christian begins at the point where he and the Muslim are in fact at one in their common human experience and predicament. Here is the very heart of the argument of Dr. Kenneth Cragg's latest book *Sandals at the Mosque*, which has just been published. Those who have read *The Call of the Minaret* will certainly want to read the new volume, which is a sequel to the other. As far as this NEWS-LETTER is concerned I would, in particular, draw attention to his most thought-provoking study of the

temper of evangelism in that section of the book which carries the very challenging title "Conditions of Inter-religion". After his own distinctive fashion Dr. Cragg goes on to press home the true method of evangelism, the being "present with the peace of God".

What has been attempted here is no more than a few notes on what is happening where different religions are meeting to-day. But behind it lies the conviction that what makes this meeting meaningful is that Christ is Himself present in the meeting. Let a real life-story make that clear. In *Design of My World*, Hassan Dehquani-Tafti, a Christian of Iran, has told the story of his own pilgrimage.

"To put it briefly," he says, "I have had to travel in my mind from Islam to Christianity and from both to agnosticism, and then back again to the foot of the Cross of Christ."

This very simply told record of our man's meeting with Christ is very closely relevant to everything said in this NEWS LETTER. It should be a great encouragement to all who are "present" at this meeting-place of religions to-day.

Your sincere friend,

Max Warren

General Secretary

If undelivered please return to

6 Salisbury Square, London, E.C.4

BOOKS OF THE MONTH

*†*Islam in West Africa*, by J. Spencer Trimingham (Oxford University Press, 1959). 30s., by post 31s. 6d.

The C.M.S. Outlook for June and August, 1959 (Price 4d. each). These two issues contain a most valuable article, written in two parts, entitled "Understanding Islam", by Canon David Anderson of Immanuel College, Ibadan, Nigeria, based on Dr. Trimingham's book, *Islam in West Africa*.

*†*Islam in Ethiopia*, by J. Spencer Trimingham (Oxford University Press, 1952). 27s. 6d., by post 28s. 9d.

*†*The Horn of Africa*, by John Buchholzer, translated from the Danish by Maurice Michael (Angus & Robertson, 1959). 18s., by post 19s. 3d.

*†*Sandals at the Mosque*, by Kenneth Cragg (S.C.M. Press, 1959). 12s. 6d., by post 13s. 6d.

*†*At Sundry Times*, by R. C. Zaehner (Faber & Faber, 1958). 21s., by post 22s. 3d. The valuable "Comparison of Religions" by the Spalding Professor of Eastern Religion and Ethics at Oxford University has an interesting Appendix, "The Qur'an and Christ".

†*Design of My World*, by Hassan Dehquani-Tafti (World Christian Books, No. 28. Lutterworth Press, 1959). 2s. 6d., by post 3s.

* May be borrowed from C.M.S. Library.

† May be ordered from C.M.S. Publishing Department.